



A DECENT LIVING LEVEL:
A PILOT OF THE 'MINIMUM INCOME
STANDARD' APPROACH IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Contents

Contents.....	2
Acknowledgements	2
1 Introduction	3
2 Purpose and design of the pilot	5
3 Methodology	16
4 Emerging Findings.....	20
5 Concluding Remarks	28
References.....	29
Annex 1 Invitation to Participate.....	
Annex 2 Recruitment Questionnaire	
Annex 3 Participant Information Leaflet (English and isiXhosa).....	
Annex 4 Participant Consent Form (English and isiXhosa).....	
Annex 5 Orientation Topic Guide	
Annex 6 Task Group Topic Guide	

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1 Introduction

The starting point for this project is a simple but fundamentally important question: what exactly do people need in order to have an acceptable standard of living? Understanding what standard of living people regard as acceptable or decent is clearly important for Government, businesses, civil society, trade unions and other organisations. The South African Government's National Development Plan provides 'a framework for the adoption of a minimum standard of living by society' and acknowledges the need for a clear definition of what this entails (NPC, 2014).

The aim of this pilot study was to ascertain whether South Africans can reach agreement both about how a decent standard of living is defined and the things that constitute this decent standard of living. The pilot used the 'Minimum Income Standard' (MIS) approach that was pioneered in the UK (e.g. Davis et al., 2016). Although the MIS approach has been shown to work well in the UK context and in several other high income countries – such as France and Portugal – South Africa is a middle-income country and also one of the most unequal countries in the world. Consequently it was important to explore whether the MIS approach was viable in this context using a small pilot study in the first instance.

This pilot study builds on a number of local initiatives, and in particular on collaborations between Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII), Southern African Social Policy Research Institute NPC (SASPRI) and the Labour Research Service (LRS) where issues around a decent standard of living have been explored. These include:

- A mixed-methods study undertaken for the Department of Social Development to explore which items are regarded by people as essential for an acceptable standard of living in South Africa. The findings from that study demonstrated that there was a surprising level of agreement around a set of indicators ('necessities for an acceptable standard of living' or 'socially perceived necessities' (SPNs)), across different sections of society (Wright and Noble, 2013; Wright, 2008; Wright et al., 2007).
- A qualitative study which explored the concept of a decent living level with low income communities in Gauteng (Frye et al., 2014)
- A quantitative study to explore the association between possession of the SPNs and income (Noble et al., 2015).

Although these earlier studies revealed a high degree of consensus across different sections of society and a clear (though non-linear) relationship with income, they did not result in the construction of a detailed, costed budget for different household types.

This pilot represents the first attempt to apply the methodology of the MIS approach in South Africa. The distinguishing feature of the MIS approach, over and above the approaches used in the earlier studies referred to, is that it moves beyond an attempt to identify the general features of a decent standard of living, and rather produces whole budgets for households, based on lists of items that they need, and therefore puts figures on minimum income requirements. The items included as being required for a decent standard of living are specified within a particular context – and the research explores whether agreement can be reached over those items within and across groups comprised of people from different social, economic and geographic locations.

Although the ultimate goal of the MIS approach is to determine income thresholds for a range of different household types, it differs in critical ways from existing income-based poverty lines in South Africa, and those used in other countries such as Mexico, which are derived from current income (or consumption) patterns, as MIS is built on the views of the general population about necessities which are then costed out.

The project was undertaken jointly by Southern African Social Policy Research Insights, Southern African Social Policy Research Institute NPC, Loughborough University, and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, with support and design inputs from SPII and LRS. A parallel pilot was undertaken by Loughborough University in Mexico with colleagues in the country and is reported on separately.

The remainder of the report is structured as follows. First, the purpose and design of the pilot is described and elaborated upon. Key issues that had to be addressed are discussed, particularly in relation to aspects of the MIS methodology which raised conceptual or practical challenges within the South African context. Second, the methodology of the pilot is described, including an account of the recruitment process, the implementation of the focus groups, and ethical and safety considerations. Third, the emerging findings from the focus groups are presented and discussed. The report concludes by highlighting the key messages that arose and the proposed ways in which the work can be taken forward.

2 Purpose and design of the pilot

The principal purpose of the pilot was to explore with people from different types of areas in South Africa whether agreement could be reached about items needed for an acceptable, decent standard of living. The primary aim of the study was not to ascertain whether South Africans can agree on the *general* themes of what constitutes a decent standard of living although this was an important element of the process as will be explained below. Rather the aim was to go beyond general, 'high-level' themes and to establish whether people from diverse settings can come to some kind of consensus on the specifics of what comprises an acceptable standard of living.

The pilot had to be designed in a manner that maximised the exploration of this 'fine detail' in different contexts, whilst also pragmatically limiting the objectives to those that could be achieved within the context of a small pilot study. The team therefore prioritised the methodological issues which could most usefully be tested through the pilot, and which would provide important 'proof of concept' information and insight prior to designing, and implementing, a full study.

2.1 The MIS approach and the stages of the approach that were explored in the pilot

The MIS team in the United Kingdom produce regular reports on how much income households need in order to afford a minimum acceptable standard of living in the UK. The methodological approach was first suggested nearly thirty years ago (Walker, 1987), but over the past decade it has developed in to a large-scale research programme, carried out by CRSP at Loughborough University, with on-going funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The results, published each year, are increasingly used to inform debate in the UK regarding the adequacy of wages, and state support in the form of pensions, in-work and out of work benefits. The MIS budgets also currently provide the basis for the voluntary living wage in the UK. As the project enters its second decade, the MIS methodology is increasingly being applied in other countries, including France, Portugal, Japan and Singapore.

A defining feature of the MIS approach is that focus groups are undertaken with people to identify (1) a definition of an acceptable, decent standard of living, for later focus groups to use as the basis for discussion; (2) a case study of example households, for later focus groups to refer back to; (3) a detailed list of goods, services and activities that the public agree are necessary for a decent standard of living (for different household structures and people of different ages). These lists are then costed in order to estimate the income required to have this minimum, acceptable standard of living.

The process of compiling minimum budgets and consequently producing income thresholds for a range of different households using the MIS approach is intricate and time-consuming, and as noted above the regular calculation of these thresholds comprises a major programme of work. The pilot study described here could not address or replicate all stages and elements of the MIS methodology. So for example, the MIS approach considers what a range of different household types and age groups need in order to have an acceptable standard of living, but exploring different household structures was not possible within the constraints of this pilot. Also, the MIS approach considers the whole range of goods, services and activities required for a decent standard of living, from childcare costs through to travel costs, but once again this task was beyond the scope of the pilot and so a subset of thematic issues were identified (communication, living area, sleeping area, elaborated below). The box below summarises the stages of the MIS approach that were focused on for the purposes of the pilot.

Box 1: Different stages of the MIS approach – which were covered in the pilot?

MIS approach in the UK	Pilot study in South Africa
Definition of a decent standard of living yes, but only through two groups
Definition of the 'case study' personyes, but just one case study was pursued*
Iteratively obtain a list of essential items yes, but just for three themes: living area, sleeping area and communication*
Repeat the lists for different age groups no, the pilot just considered people of working age
Repeat the lists for different household types no- the pilot just considered a single person, though s/he can live in any household type
Cost out the agreed set of essential items, smoothing the costs of those items across an agreed life-span for each item, and obtaining expert input for some items no
Produce budgets in order to obtain an income threshold needed for an acceptable standard of living for different household compositions no
Undertake a final set of negotiation groups no

*The most pivotal questions for pilot phase: is this achievable in South Africa?

As can be seen from the summary in Box 1, the pilot was intentionally designed to test the critical issue of whether the groups were able to reach a consensus about the three selected themes.

In relation to the drawing up of a definition of a decent standard of living, this project built on extensive work that has been undertaken in this regard in the South African context (e.g. Noble et al., 2007; Wright and Noble, 2013; Frye et al., 2014). This meant that subsequent stages in the MIS methodology could be prioritised for exploration in the pilot. Specifically, the aim of the pilot was to ascertain whether agreement could be reached in diverse settings about the fine detail of necessities for a decent standard of living: this is achieved through the iterative compilation of lists that are linked back to the overarching definition of a decent standard of living. Whilst this process is repeated for different age groups and household types for a full MIS study - for example, MIS distinguishes between children aged 0-2, 3-4, 5-10, and 11-18 – this far exceeded the resources available for the pilot and so a pragmatic decision was made to focus on the needs of a person of working age.

The pilot therefore focused on key methodological steps that had not been undertaken previously in South Africa. The purpose was to explore whether or not the drawing up of lists of necessities which are then iteratively reviewed, refined and agreed on by groups in different contexts could be achieved. If this could be demonstrated then the remaining stages of the MIS approach would be relatively straightforward (albeit time-consuming and costly) to implement in a full study.

2.2 Additional issues for consideration at the design stage

As well as determining the stages and elements of the MIS approach to be prioritised for the purpose of the pilot, the team worked closely at the design stage to identify aspects of the MIS approach that might prove to be challenging or even inappropriate in the South African context, and to identify potential solutions and ways forward. It was also necessary to clearly articulate the questions that would be tested within the pilot.

Below six key issues are summarised which were discussed in team meetings that took place in person in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town over a two-year period prior to the implementation of the actual field work.

Issue 1: The name of the project and terminology in the definition

MIS self-evidently starts with the word 'Minimum'. The team were concerned that in the South African context the use of the word 'minimum' would steer participants towards issues associated only with matters of survival or subsistence (such as food and shelter) rather than discussion being oriented around a standard of living that goes beyond this meagre but important threshold. This was a particular concern in the context of there having been an income poverty line in South Africa called the Minimum Living Level (MLL) which was first introduced in the 1970s and which became associated with the setting of very low wages for workers (e.g. Magasela, 2005).

In light of these concerns the team decided to refer to the project as being about a 'Decent Living Level' which itself is more explicitly tied to the idea of a decent standard of living. The use of the word 'decent' was intended to capture and describe a standard of living that is both adequate and broadly supported.

At the start of the MIS project in the UK there were a series of groups (orientation groups) whose primary function was to discuss and agree on a definition a minimum standard of living. Within these groups, discussion about how an acceptable minimum living standard might be defined began by exploring the usefulness of existing definitions. Groups then discussed key elements that should be included in a definition. The themes emerging from these discussions were distilled into a brief statement that encapsulates what groups identified as being needed in order to have a minimum socially acceptable standard of living:

'A minimum standard of living in the UK today includes, but is more than just, food, clothes and shelter. It is about having what you need in order to have the opportunities and choices necessary to participate in society.' (Davis et al., 2016, p.4)

This definition has been used as the basis for all subsequent discussions and has framed each MIS group undertaken within the UK.

In planning this pilot project, the team presented two definitions that could be commented on and amended in the initial 'orientation' groups in South Africa. The first definition was adapted from Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child¹:

"things which are necessary for a person's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social well-being"

The second definition was put together by the team with reference to the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996), and building on previous recent work undertaken by members of the team regarding socially perceived necessities (Wright and Noble, 2013). Both the Constitution and even the previous study had involved extensive consultation that far exceeded what could be accomplished within the remit of this pilot and so building a definition on this existing work was a pragmatic decision. The definition that the team assembled, based on this existing work, was as follows:

"People who have a decent living level are able to participate fully in society, however they choose to do so. A decent living level includes personal possessions, social networks, housing, services provided to the house and in the local area, and

¹ See <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>.

the ability to take part in social activities. A decent living level is not a luxury living level, but rather the level at which we think all people should be able to live in South Africa.”

This definition emphasises full participation in society, and acknowledges the existence of personal choices and preferences. It refers to physical possessions as well as social ties and features of the neighbourhood which had all been prominent in previous research. A decision was made to explicitly distinguish the ‘decent living level’ from a ‘luxury living level’ – or what people agree is needed rather than what people may agree is an extravagance – to highlight the fact that the objective was not to draw up a wish-list of a luxurious lifestyle, but rather to reach agreement about the requirements for a decent standard of living that everyone ought to be able to have.

Having established a definition, there was extensive discussion about how best to translate ‘decent standard of living’ or ‘decent living level’ into isiXhosa, as this would be the language used in many of the groups. After several expressions had been considered and rejected by the five members of the team who were fluent isiXhosa-speakers, an expression was identified which, though rarely used, captured the essence of the concept best: **Ubomi obunga hlelelekanga**. Literally translated, this expression means ‘a life without struggle’.

Issue 2: The composition of focus groups

In the UK, MIS brings together people of all income levels to take part in each focus group and this is seen as one of the approach’s strengths – groups are not bringing together individuals from one income group to discuss minimum needs, but are seeking to reach agreement about these needs across the income distribution. In addition, most groups are undertaken with both male and female participants, are exclusively held in English, and recruitment does not take into account people’s ethnicity. The team were concerned that some of these features might raise practical and ethical challenges in the South African context. In relation to the practical difficulties these mostly centred on issues about the selection of the venue and the language for the focus groups: finding a venue where people would feel comfortable and not ill at ease, and could travel to easily, whatever their economic background would be a challenge, and it would be inappropriate to conduct all the groups in English as South Africa has eleven official languages. Ethically, the team was concerned that groups that brought together very wealthy and very poor people to discuss the necessities for a decent standard of living would make those who lacked many of the items feel uncomfortable or worse. There was also a concern about age differences within the group (with older people’s voices being more respected in some communities, and less in others), and of having men and women both present (with women’s voices being more respected in mixed-gender settings in some communities and less in others).

The team took the decision not to divide the groups by age or by gender, given the small number of groups that could be undertaken in total, but rather to ensure that the facilitators were well trained to deal with any issues of ageism and sexism that might arise in these group contexts. The team saw no justifiable reason to divide groups by population group. It was agreed that the pilot groups could be undertaken in two of the eleven official languages: English and isiXhosa.

Issue 3: The duration and day of the week of the focus groups

The MIS 'task' groups (which are the groups that draw up the detailed lists of goods, services and activities) last approximately six hours each in the UK. The team was concerned that this would be problematic for most participants who would be being required to take an unusually large amount of time out of their week that was neither work nor leisure. Those in work would be unable to take time out of work during the day time easily. Groups held at the weekend would be hard to attend for those with school-age children (or other people) to look after. Events in the evening would raise extra concerns about the personal safety of the group participants and facilitators.

The team decided to fix the length of each group to a maximum of 2 hours in duration, although most ran for 1.5 hours. Where possible, groups were held in the mornings and included a spread of weekday and weekend groups. The two groups in the suburbs were convened in the early evening as all the recruited participants were unavailable during working hours. Lastly, the groups were scheduled so that they did not take place too close to the local elections (3rd August 2016), so as to ensure that it was clear that they were not linked to any electioneering event or political party.

Issue 4: The MIS case study name and location

In the UK, the MIS 'orientation' groups, undertaken at the start of the research project, drew up a series of case study characters comprising a named person/people and the name of the place where they live. For example:

'Lily is 72 and lives on her own in a one-bedroom flat, with access to a small outside space. She is in reasonably good health and lives in [place where the focus group is taking place].'

The case study character then becomes the focal point for subsequent groups who determine what 'Lily' needs for a decent standard of living. In this way, participants in groups are not being asked to talk about what they as individuals need, but rather to consider the needs of an imaginary individual.

In South Africa, there was concern that the specification of an individual's name (or even how it is pronounced) would carry too many connotations about their class, and potentially their population group and income bracket. This in turn could cause people to project certain standards onto the case study character and might influence group discussion and decisions about what that person would need for a decent standard of living.

Similarly, the naming of a place could steer participants towards making particular value judgements about what items are essential in the context of that specific area. So for example, if the case study character lived in a rural village in the Eastern Cape then participants might select necessities that took into account the absence of piped water to that village.

Taking all of these challenges into account, the team agreed to draw up a draft case study that referred to Ms B/ Mr B. If anything, 'Ms' implies a degree of modernity (being neither Miss nor Mrs) by deliberately excluding information about marital status. 'B' was selected as it does not imply that the person is from any particular population group: it could stand for Banks, Bengu, Bezuidenhout, Booysen, Buthelezi, and so on. Similarly, rather than specifying the place where Ms B/Mr B lived, a decision was made instead to stress simply that they live in South Africa. In terms of their age they were defined as being aged 18-59, so too old to be eligible for the Child Support Grant and too young to be eligible for the Old Age Grant, two important types of government social assistance.

Having agreed that Ms B/Mr B would be described as working age and living in South Africa, it was decided that the initial 'orientation' groups would be asked to discuss and then specify the type of home that they lived in. The team chose to ask about Ms B/Mr B's 'home' rather than 'house' in order to avoid any implication that they necessarily lived in a Western style house. The team also avoided the use of the word 'rooms' in the groups, and instead used 'areas' so as not to assume that the home comprised different rooms in recognition that some traditional dwellings comprise separate buildings for separate purposes rather than a dwelling that is divided up into different rooms for different purposes.

Issue 5: Assumptions about which aspects of a decent standard of living are already in place, and selection of which aspects to consider in the pilot

Closely related to the previous point, there was extensive discussion within the team about which goods and services could be assumed to be in place for Ms B/Mr B. The MIS case-studies in the UK are based on the assumption that individuals have access to basic services such as electricity, water and sanitation, that people live in Western-style housing, and that most urban areas are similar. Additional MIS studies have been undertaken on the additional costs of living in rural areas in England and Scotland and of living in London.

In South Africa, these assumptions in relation to key services are potentially problematic: could it (and should it) be assumed that the place where Ms B/Mr B lives is connected to electricity and has piped water? And could it (and should it) be assumed that they have adequate housing? Some of the participants in the groups may not have these things in place and so it would be necessary to be sufficiently explicit about what is in place already for Ms B/Mr B without being prescriptive about the consequences of those things being in place. For example, whilst it might be made explicit that the house has piped water and electricity, it would remain an open question as to whether a washing machine was an essential item. Ultimately, while a fully implemented MIS might take into account the running costs of a washing machine, it would not take into account the cost of installing running water to a dwelling to enable the washing machine to function.

The decision was made to conceptually distinguish the focus of MIS (things in the home and needed to participate) from matters relating to the structure of the home, and features of the area in which people lived. This followed what has happened in the UK MIS programme where separate studies had been undertaken on minimum home standards (Shelter 2016), and on minimum acceptable place standards (Padley et al., 2013). Whilst the pilot would not specify the type of home that Ms B/ Mr B lived in (to the extent that Lily is said to live in a one-bed flat) it would probably be necessary to agree upon certain aspects being in place within the home that someone with sufficient income would choose to live in. This process informed the decision to focus on three themes: that of communication, the living area, and the sleeping area.

Issue 6: The unit of analysis, and assumptions about household composition

In terms of household composition, MIS in the UK focuses in initial groups on the needs of *individuals* who are then brought together into households later in the process. So for example, the needs of a working age couple without children are discussed separately from those of an individual living alone. The needs of children of different ages are discussed separately from parents and are then combined into households in order to explore both the additional costs and the economies of scale that can and do arise from children living within households.

In the South African context very few people live in single-person households. It was therefore agreed that it would be inappropriate to assume that Ms B/Mr B lived alone, even though they were described as single. Thus, whilst the focus was kept on the needs of Ms B/ Mr B, the case study did not prescribe how many other people lived in the dwelling.

2.3 Purpose and scheduling of the focus groups for the pilot

In order to explore whether agreement could be reached within groups and across different groups about the detail of necessities, seven focus groups were arranged, with four different purposes (in four stages):

Stage 1: Two 'orientation' groups (FG1 and FG2).

The aim of these groups was to develop and agree upon a definition of a decent standard of living with the participants, and to prepare a description of the case study character that subsequent focus groups would refer to (i.e. Ms B/Mr B described above).

Stage 2: Two 'task' groups (FG3 and FG4).

The aim here was to discuss some aspects of Ms B's / Mr B's life and decide what she/he needs in order to enjoy a decent standard of living (as defined in Stage 1). Participants were tasked with compiling a list of items that were necessary in order for Ms B or Mr B to have a decent standard of living. This 'task' was undertaken in relation to three aspects of life: communication, the living area and the sleeping area.

Stage 3: Two 'check-back' groups. (FG5 and FG6).

These groups were tasked with reviewing the list of items compiled by the previous 'task' groups and exploring whether or not participants could reach agreement that the items listed are necessary for a decent standard of living.

Stage 4: One final negotiation group (FG7).

The purpose of this group was to resolve any outstanding issues about the items that were brought forward by the previous group.

The pilot was therefore undertaken as an iterative process – a critical and central element of the MIS approach – whereby focus groups were linked to one another, ensuring that information and decisions flowed through – and importantly were reviewed by - successive groups.

The table below lists the seven focus groups, by type and how they relate to previous groups. The place name, province, type of area, and language of the groups are also shown.

Table 1: The focus groups: type and purpose, venue and location, area type and language

<i>Focus Group</i>	<i>Type of MIS focus group</i>	<i>How this group relates to previous groups</i>	<i>Venue, Place (Province)</i>	<i>Type of area and language used in group</i>
1	Orientation Group	N/A	Community Centre. Gugulethu (Western Cape)	Township (isiXhosa)
2	Orientation Group	Build on FG1	Community Centre. Gugulethu (Western Cape)	Township (isiXhosa)
3	Task Group	Uses definition and case study from FG1 and FG2	Office building. Claremont (Western Cape)	Urban formal suburb (isiXhosa and English)
4	Task Group	Uses definition and case study from FG1 and FG2	School hall. Peddie (Eastern Cape)	Former Homeland (isiXhosa)
5	Check back Group	Check back on FG3	School hall. Peddie (Eastern Cape)	Former Homeland (isiXhosa)
6	Check back Group	Check back on FG4	Office building. Observatory (Western Cape)	Urban formal suburb (English)
7	Final Negotiation Group	Resolve any outstanding items from FG3 and FG4	Community Centre. Gugulethu (Western Cape)	Township (isiXhosa)

The groups were sequenced to start and finish in a township context, in this instance in Gugulethu in the Western Cape. The reason for this is because townships are located on the periphery of urban formal centres and as such can be seen as being at the frontline of the divisions in South African society. Although mostly low income, residents in townships have ties with and exposure to both remote rural areas and urban formal areas and so have direct experience of a range of different standards of living in South Africa.

The sequencing of the focus groups was designed and undertaken in such a way that groups in very different settings were asked to review lists that had been generated in a different context. Although the Orientation Groups which finalised the definition and case study both took place in a township context, the Task Groups took place in an urban formal setting (focus group 3) and former homeland area (focus group 4). The results from these groups were then 'checked back' in different settings again: a group in a former homeland setting (focus group 5) reviewed the results from an urban formal setting (focus group 3); and a group in an urban formal setting (focus group 6) reviewed the results from a former homeland setting (focus group 4). Any outstanding issues were taken to the final

negotiation group in a township (focus group 7). This scheduling of the groups enabled the results to be 'reality checked' in different contexts in an iterative way.

3 Methodology

3.1 *The recruitment process*

The recruitment process targeted individuals who were between the ages of 18-59 and so were of working age. This ensured that participants were the same age as the hypothetical Ms B/Mr B in the case study. Every effort was taken to ensure that participants lived in the area where each focus group would take place. With the exception of FG3, recruitment was undertaken several days in advance of the group, so that people could have a 'cooling off' period and decide whether they did indeed wish to take part. Follow-up calls were made prior to the actual event to ensure that people were still able to take part.

At the time of recruitment, potential participants were given an invitation letter (see Annex 1) and asked to respond to the recruitment questionnaire (Annex 2) which contained a number of proxies for people's socio-economic group. Those who met the criteria and were available for the relevant groups were given a letter confirming the date and time of the group, and a leaflet with information about the project (Annex 3).

A number of challenges were encountered during the recruitment process. First, it was particularly problematic accessing and recruiting people from higher income groups. This was often due to people's availability to participate in discussions, particularly if they were employed. In practice, the recruitment process was undertaken differently in each area in order to accommodate and allow for the realities of each location.

The vast majority of participants in the Gugulethu focus groups were recruited from a local community church. The participants in these groups were active members of the church who are amenable to taking part in activities for the good of others. They also lived within a community where there has been extensive research and media attention, so were likely to be reasonably familiar with being approached for this kind of activity, particularly because of the church's active campaigning stance on supporting people who are HIV positive.

The recruitment for the focus group held in Claremont proved more challenging than previously anticipated. This group was initially intended to consist of mainly middle class professionals. For a number of reasons, the participants instead comprised people (all women) from townships (some from Gugulethu) who worked in a call centre in an office in an urban formal suburb of Cape Town. Although all in employment, most were on short-term contracts and so were not necessarily in a higher economic bracket than people in the previous two focus groups.

Recruitment for the focus groups conducted in Peddie in the Eastern Cape was done with the primary objective of recruiting participants from a former homeland.

The focus group conducted in Observatory, Cape Town consisted of solely middle class professionals. All participants had tertiary level education. These participants were recruited through an education think tank. As a result, most of them were involved in some form of social justice or development work, whether paid or voluntary.

3.2 Implementation of the Focus Groups

Each focus group began with the research team members and the participants briefly introducing themselves. Thereafter the members of the team explained the type and purpose of the group (Orientation, Task, Check Back or Final Negotiation Group) and then explained the role of the participants. The members of the team who were facilitating the group discussions outlined the purpose of the pilot and the reasons for undertaking these discussions. The moderators carefully went through the “Participant Information Leaflet” (Annex 3) which was given to all participants prior to the focus group and included information on what the pilot project was about, why participants had been asked to take part in the focus groups, the incentives that participants would receive for agreeing to take part in the study, how the focus groups would be conducted, information about the team conducting the study and the confidentiality of participants information. All participants were informed that all focus groups would be recorded in order to have an accurate account of the discussions and in order to produce transcripts at the end of the study. Participants were also informed that all details would be anonymised when the analysis of the research was undertaken in order to prevent individuals from being identified.

The focus groups proceeded in different ways depending on the type of group. The main objective for the Orientation Groups (Focus groups 1 and 2) was to construct the definition of what a decent standard of living is in the context of South Africa. These two groups were also tasked with constructing the case study that would be used in later groups. Annex 5 contains the Orientation Group topic guide. The outcome of these – and the subsequent - groups is discussed in the next section.

The definition that had been developed in the Orientation Groups was presented to the Task Groups (Focus groups 3 and 4). Participants were asked to list the goods and services that Ms B/ Mr B needed in order to have a decent standard of living, as described in the definition. Participants were also asked to explain why the items were essential, and specify the quantity of the items, how long the item should last and where the item should be purchased. This was done in order to ascertain whether there could still be agreement on items at a fine level of detail. See Annex 6 for the Task Group topic guide.

The Check Back groups (Focus groups 5 and 6) had a similar purpose to the Task groups, but rather than compiling a list of essential items afresh, participants were asked to review the list of goods and services agreed in the earlier Task Groups, and to see whether they could also reach consensus on those items. In reviewing the lists assembled in the task groups, participants were able to add essential items they thought had been omitted by previous groups and/or remove things that were not seen as necessary to reach a decent standard of living. Importantly, items that a group could not reach agreement about were brought forward to the next group.

The Final Negotiation group (Focus group 7) was the last stage of the iterative process and had the task of reviewing the lists of items and reaching agreement, particularly for any items that had not been resolved previously, that in relation to the three aspects of life explored in the groups – communication, the living area and the sleeping area – these goods and services would enable all in South Africa to achieve a decent standard of living.

In each focus group discussion flipcharts were used to capture the list of items that participants could agree were necessary for a decent standard of living. The flipchart was also used to display both the definition and the case study, established in the first stage of groups. These were placed in the front of the venue for all participants to see at the beginning of and throughout each session. At a minimum there was one facilitator and one assistant facilitator, however in many of the groups there were one or two additional members of the team present who could assist with the logistics and observe the process.

As well as recording each of the groups, the team kept a detailed 'MIS diary', capturing key information and observations from each of the research team members about each focus group. More specifically, the diary provided a working, shared documents that captured information of three sorts. First, the 'diary' summarises the information about the participants that was obtained in the recruitment questionnaire, including the highest education attainment, employment status, gender, age, population group and household composition. Second, it captures the general views of the research team about how the focus group discussions went, noting any gender or other group dynamics that might have affected discussions and decisions agreed within the groups. Finally, the MIS diary includes the lists of goods and services that participants had agreed were necessary for a decent standard of living together with the detail about where items would be purchased and how long they would last. Capturing this level of detail is critical to the MIS process as this is what ultimately enables costed household budgets to be put together, which form the basis of estimates of the income needed to achieve a decent standard of living.

3.3 Ethical and Safety Considerations

The project was submitted to Loughborough University's Ethics Committee for approval which was granted.

Participants were asked to sign a "Participant Consent" form (Annex 4). The form outlined the terms under which participants had agreed to take part in the study, the responsibilities that the research team had to participants to keep their information confidential, and the incentive payment that participants would be paid for participating in the study. Before signing the form, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study, the purpose of the focus groups and about their roles in the discussions. Participants were asked to sign a copy of the consent form, a copy of which they kept for their records. From this point onwards an audio recording of the focus group discussion was made in order to have an accurate record of the discussion which could then be transcribed and, where appropriate, translated.

All participants except for the focus groups conducted in Peddie were given a Pick n Pay gift voucher valued at R450 for agreeing to take part in the study. Pick n Pay is a mid-range supermarket which sells a wide range of own-brand and branded goods. The participants from Peddie received the R450 in cash as there was no nearby Pick n Pay or equivalent store where participants could utilize such a voucher. It was made clear that participants would receive the voucher regardless of whether they decided to proceed with the focus group or not. It was also emphasized that participants could withdraw from the group at any point.

The safety of the participants and the researchers was an important consideration. The groups were undertaken by three or more researchers and the safety of each venue was ensured prior to securing the bookings. The rental charge for the venue in the township included a payment for security.

4 Emerging Findings

4.1 Profile of the focus groups participants

The seven focus groups that constituted the pilot were undertaken in July and August 2016. The location of the groups are shown in Box 1 above. In total, 67 people of working age took part in the focus groups, of whom 61% were female and 39% were male. The participants had a range of educational levels (highest level attained: 25% primary/pre-primary, 42% secondary, 25% tertiary, 3% other, 4% unreported) and employment statuses (39% employed, 27% unemployed, 12% home-maker, 10% retired, 7% self-employed, 4% unreported). The languages used in the groups were isiXhosa and English.

Collectively the groups straddle a range of diverse contexts and people. Diversity was achieved in terms of gender, age (within the band of 18-59), area type (urban formal, township, rural former homeland), education level and employment status. Even groups in the same area type had different compositions, so for example group 1 in Gugulethu was comprised mostly of people who were unemployed or home-makers, whereas in group 2 in the same place all the participants were in employment.

Diversity was achieved to a lesser extent in other important respects: language (only two of the eleven official languages were used); province (only two of the nine provinces were included); and population group (all participants were black African except in focus group 6).

4.2 Drawing up a definition of a decent living level

Participants in the orientation groups (focus groups 1 and 2) were asked to list the features that are required for a decent living level in South Africa today. Through the discussions, participants highlighted common ideas about what is needed for a decent standard of living. Participants referred to both the material and non-material as being central to a decent standard of living: access to a decent education, job opportunities, shelter, communication, freedom of expression and sanitation were all described as fundamental to achieving a decent living standard alongside food, water, electricity and clothing. The majority of participants in these initial groups agreed that these were essential in order to have a decent standard of living as lacking one or more of these might well lead to a life of poverty.

Participants highlighted that two key pre-requisites for a decent standard of living were receiving a good education and then being employed. This is particularly important in South Africa where there is no social assistance for people of working age unless they are disabled.

In relation to shelter, participants acknowledged that there are different types of dwellings in South Africa, and discussions took place about what features characterise a home that

would enable people to achieve a decent standard of living. For example, one participant suggested that to have a decent house it would have to be situated in a suburb, the rationale being that in the townships it is not safe due to crime and drug or alcohol abuse. However, another participant argued that one does not necessarily need to reside in a suburb to attain a decent living but rather what matters is the environment, and that the house should have a solid, permanent structure with a toilet and piped water into the house. Electricity was described as being vital for cooking, the operation of electric appliances, and lighting, and is also necessary to run a successful business. Participants stressed that the electricity supply would need to be safe and legal.

Communication was identified as critically important, both in terms of possessing the skills to communicate well with others and having the technological tools with which to communicate. To this end, participants regarded a cell-phone, and a smartphone in particular, as an essential item: with a smartphone it is possible to undertake cell phone banking, money transfers, receive and send e-mails, as well as communicate with family and friends, and do online shopping. Younger participants were more vocal in the discussions about communication than older participants. Participants also highlighted transport as being essential for a decent standard of living. Most were in agreement that public transport was sufficient in order to achieve a decent standard of living, and that a car was not essential, though others noted that public transport is in need of improvement as it is inadequate in its current state.

Alongside material goods and services, groups referred to the 'non-material' including love, having a sense of responsibility, and having self-confidence and respect for oneself and for others. The participants argued that without self-confidence, for example, it is difficult to succeed or achieve a decent standard of living, but at the same time, in defining a decent standard of living – as described through the things that everyone in South Africa should be able to have – it is difficult to specify the non-material as essential or to conclude that individuals are living below a decent standard of living because they lack, for example, self-confidence.

Having completed the list of features of a decent standard of living, participants were asked to comment on the draft definitions (see Section 2.2) with reference to their own lists. The additional changes that were made to the draft definitions were for there to be a distinction between social networks and family, and where the UN definition includes 'spiritual...well-being', participants proposed that 'belief system' was preferable as although not everyone has a faith everyone has a belief system. The participants tended towards the second of the two draft definitions, and the final definition that emerged from focus group 2 was as follows:

Box 3: The Orientation Groups' Definition of a Decent Living Level

In South Africa, people who have a decent living level should be able to participate fully in society, however they choose to do so. A decent living level includes personal possessions, social and family networks, a belief system, housing, services provided to the house and in the local area, and the ability to take part in social activities. A decent living level is not a luxury living level, but rather the level at which everyone should be able to live in South Africa.

4.3 The case study

Participants in the orientation groups (focus groups 1 and 2) were invited to comment on the case study character, referred to in section 2.2. This case study would then be used in the subsequent focus groups, which would be tasked with beginning to identify and agree what exactly is needed in order to have a decent standard of living. Participants were told that the person would be single and of working age and called Ms B/ Mr B, but were asked to describe the type of home that Ms B/ Mr B would live in.

Participants agreed that in order for Ms B/ Mr B to have a decent standard of living they would need to have a brick house (without cracks) which was weather-proof, running water and electricity, both of which should be safe and from legal sources. Participants from both orientation groups were very vocal when discussing the nature of dwellings and the services that these should have in order to provide a decent living standard. These points were retained, with the exception of the mention of bricks so as not to exclude other types of dwelling that are weather-proof, and the resultant definition was as follows:

Box 4: The Orientation Groups' Definition of the Case Study

Ms B / Mr B is a single working age person. She or he lives in South Africa in a home that has solid walls which are weatherproof, and there is safe and legal supply of electricity and water inside the home.

4.4 The lists of essential items

Despite the diversity of the groups, people were able to agree upon the necessities for Ms B/Mr B, in relation to the three aspects of communication, a living area and the sleeping area. In this way, this pilot project demonstrated that it is possible to reach consensus about the ways in which elements of a decent living standard are described, within a society that is divided along many lines.

In focus groups 3 and 4, participants were presented with the definition of a decent standard of living, and introduced to Ms B/Mr B, and asked to list the things (goods, services and activities) that Ms B or Mr B would need in order to meet this decent standard of living, irrespective of the costs associated with realizing those needs. This is a key element of the MIS process: groups are asked to consider not what the case study individual can 'afford', but rather what this decent living level comprises. Groups initially requested more detail about Ms B/Mr B's employment or financial status, in order to be able to locate them economically and identify necessities that would correspond. However, when it was explained that the intention was to identify necessities that anyone, of whatever employment or financial status, should have the Task Groups quickly understood. Again, as noted earlier, it is important that groups are considering the needs of a generalised 'other', described in the broadest possible terms, rather than linking a particular description of a decent living standard to specific individual characteristics, such as type of employment or educational qualifications. The decent living level in South Africa is one that people can agree no one should fall below, not one that some, but not all, deserve.

As highlighted earlier, participants were asked to produce lists of things that Ms B/ Mr B would require in order to have a decent standard of living, in relation to the three aspects of life: communication, a living area and sleeping area. For each of these aspects, participants were asked to explain what items were needed, why these were necessary, and the implications for Ms B/ Mr B if they lacked that item. Once the group had reached agreement on an item, and explained why it was important, if there was time then participants were additionally asked to specify where the item could be purchased and the duration that the item should last. In a larger-scale MIS project, beyond a pilot, these items would subsequently be costed at the specified stores, with this cost spread across the lifetime of the item in order to produce weekly budgets, but this was not undertaken in the pilot.

Items were discussed in detail, first in the Task Groups (groups 3 and 4) and then in the Check Back Groups (groups 5 and 6) and any outstanding issues were carried through to the final group for resolution (group 7). Box 5 sets out the goods and services that were defined as essential for Ms B/ Mr B, and for some of the items the lifespan of the item or their value.

These items were agreed or finalised in group 7, with the exception of the TV and TV stand in the sleeping area, which was left unresolved.

Box 5: Essential items for Ms B/Mr B in relation to communication, the living area and the sleeping area

Communication

Entry level smart phones (1 year)
Access to post office
Stamps (R150 per year)
Envelopes (R150 per year)
Library
TV
Transport
Postal address
WiFi (5GB)
Laptop (5 years)
Radio (via HiFi)
Newspaper (Access every day and R15 for the weekly paper)

The sleeping area

Bed base (15 years)
Mattress (7 years)
Headboard (15 years)
Dressing table with mirror and chair (15 years)
Bedside pedestals (15 years)
Wardrobe (15 years)
Blankets x 2 (2 years)
Pillows (2 or 4) (3 years)
Pillow cases (4 or 8) (3 years)
Comforters (2 or 3 sets) (3 years)
Sheets (3 sets) (fitted and top sheet) ((1.5 years)
Bedside lamp (2) (10 years, 5 years bulbs)
Heater (different from the one in the Living area, and not an electric blanket) (5 years)
TV and TV Stand - unresolved
Carpet
Curtains

The living area

DSTV compact
Coffee Table (15 years)
Access to books

Pot plants
Air vents for ventilation
Covered flooring
Heater
TV (10 years)
TV stand
HiFi system with radio, CD and DVD players 10 years
6 seater lounge suite (15 years)
Bookshelf (Does not need to be replaced)
Dining table and chairs (10 years)
DVDs (R2000 per year)
Burglar bars
CDs (R250 every month)
Curtains

Participants were asked to describe the purpose and quantity or size of items, and these details often revealed the relational function of items that had been defined as essential. Asking participants to discuss and set out the rationales explaining why particular goods and services are needed for a decent living level results in a description of a living standard that goes beyond a detailed list of 'things', revealing the value of particular items, their role in providing a decent standard of living, and why lacking these items would mean individuals are living below this standard. For example, participants argued that it was important for Ms/Mr B to have a 6 piece sofa set for when s/he had visitors. Although there was a discussion about the material of the sofa and how it affected quality, it was agreed that the material did not matter as long as it was bought from a mid-range store. The TV was seen as important for staying informed with what was happening in the world and was an important source of entertainment and education. It was also described as important so that Ms B/Mr B could take part in conversations with others about popular TV shows. In this way, a TV was not only a source of entertainment but also key to enabling social participation. Participants argued that it was necessary to have a DSTV compact because the free TV channels were too limited. The DSTV compact gave them access to a larger variety of news, entertainment and education channels, and the point was made that in order to be able to participate in conversations with others about shows these would not necessarily just be on the free TV channels. The groups agreed that the full DSTV package would be a luxury and was not included in the list. This is an illustration of the way in which groups, with reference to the definition of a decent living level, are able to agree on the detail of items needed to reach this level, rooted in rationales about their value and use, but also are able to identify items that go beyond this.

The participants included transport in their list for communication, on the basis that they often needed transport to meet family and friends as well as to attend community meetings

and they put this under the banner of full participation in society as per the definition of a decent living level. Within the discussion about transport, the participants also mentioned the importance of tarred roads, stressing that they are important for whatever transport they were using.

In relation to phones, a landline phone was initially defined as essential in addition to a cell phone as sometimes cell phones got lost or the cell phone signal is poor. However, this was later rejected in favour of just a cell phone, more specifically a midrange smart phone. Participants argued that a cell phone was important in order to be able to access the internet, which was important for 'informal' social participation but also for more formal purposes, such as accessing employment. In addition, the groups agreed that it would be important for Ms B/Mr B to have access to a computer, following a discussion about needing an email address as part their communication needs. The participants decided that for accessing email, attaching documents etc. Ms B/ Mr B needed to have a laptop within the home as those many of these functions could realistically not be undertaken on a cell phone.

Within the living and the sleeping areas the task groups specified that the furniture was mostly to be acquired from Lewis, Barnettes or other similar mid-range stores. Bedding and curtains were to be purchased from Home Choice.

The check back groups for the most part agreed with the lists compiled at the task group stage. The lists generated by focus group 3 (the urban formal group in Claremont) were checked by focus group 5 (a rural former homeland group in Peddie); and the lists generated by focus group 4 (a rural former homeland group in Peddie) were checked by Focus group 6 (the wholly tertiary-educated group in Observatory). The check-back groups did not make any significant changes but rather made small refinements to the specification of items. For example, the group in Peddie whilst agreeing that a 6-seater sofa was necessary specified that it should be leather in order to ensure that it would last for 15 years. More significantly, they argued that a TV in the sleeping area was a luxury and should not be in both the sleeping area and the living area.

The area of greatest contestation occurred in focus group 6 (the wholly tertiary-educated group in Observatory) as the participants initially had great difficulty in understanding and then accepting the objectives that had been set for the group. For example, they raised concerns about the phrase in the definition that "people should be able to participate in society however they choose to do so", stating that the statement was open to a variety of interpretations that could eventually lead to misuse. Furthermore, participants argued that as South Africa is so diverse, with such a range of cultures, this would mean that different groups would produce very different lists. What also became evident in this group is that participants were trying to set a minimum standard for people other than themselves,

rather than for any individual called Ms B/Mr B in South Africa: for example, they initially stated that there was no need for a sofa as people could sit on the floor. The importance of the case study to inform participant's discussions and decisions had to be emphasized throughout, and eventually the participants had engaging discussions about the list that had been compiled by focus group 4. Ultimately, the participants agreed with almost all of the items from the previous group.

5 Concluding Remarks

The pilot began with a simple but very important question: what exactly do people in South Africa need to have a decent standard of living? The aim of this initial pilot project was to explore whether it was possible to reach agreement in the South African context about what is a decent standard of living, before considering a full scale project.

It is worth emphasizing that all of the focus groups that were conducted involved rigorous and engaging discussions. Once participants in the various groups became familiar with the aim of the groups in relation to the study, participants were able to have critical and rigorous discussions on what constituted a decent life in relation to the case study of the hypothetical Ms B/ Mr B.

The groups were able to reach agreement about the items needed for Ms B/ Mr B for a decent standard of living, in relation to communication, the living area and the sleeping area. This was achieved at a fine-grained level of detail, and it was possible to explore issues about the items' quality and durability. As such, any initial concerns about whether agreement can be achieved about the fine detail of necessities in a country as diverse and divided as South Africa quickly receded. At the very least, the pilot does demonstrate that men and women in two provinces of South Africa from a range of area types (township, urban formal, rural former homeland), and with a range of education levels (pre-primary through to tertiary) and in two languages are able to reach agreement about the necessities for a working age person in South Africa in relation to communication, the living area and the sleeping area of their home.

In this respect key aspects of the MIS approach worked successfully. However, in other respects, adjustments had to be made upfront and would need to be addressed in a full MIS study. So for example, MIS groups in the UK intentionally comprise a diverse group of people, but the team did not think this would be feasible logistically in South Africa and might cause discomfort for some people, given the extent of inequality and the history of the country.

A full MIS study in South Africa would need to take into account all the points raised in Section 2.2 of this report, relating to issues of terminology; language, composition and duration of the groups; the need to make any assumptions explicit about which services are in place; and ensuring that the household compositions that occur in South Africa are adequately captured. In addition to these issues and the challenge of the cost and time required to conduct a full study it would need to address the full range of the purchasable necessities for a decent standard of living. The pilot has demonstrated that the principle of achieving agreement about items in a group context, and across groups in different contexts is feasible, but there is much that remains to be explored in the full study.

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Annex 1 Invitation to Participate

Annex 2 Recruitment Questionnaire

Annex 3 Participant Information Leaflet (English and isiXhosa)

Annex 4 Participant Consent Form (English and isiXhosa)

Annex 5 Orientation Topic Guide

Annex 6 Task Group Topic Guide

All Annexes are available on request.